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El Salvador: A Net Assessment of the War

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An Intelligence Assessment

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*ALA 86-10006
February 1986*

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [redacted]
[redacted] Office of African and Latin American
Analysis, with a contribution from [redacted]
[redacted] ALA. It was coordinated with the
Directorate of Operations. [redacted]

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be
directed to the Chief, Middle America-Caribbean
Division, ALA, [redacted]

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A Net Assessment
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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 20 January 1986
was used in this report.*

In our judgment, the Salvadoran armed forces—largely because of US economic and military assistance—broke the tactical stalemate in the lengthy conflict with the rebel alliance in 1984, and in 1985 forced tactical changes on the insurgents that have underscored the government's superiority and disheartened the rebel leadership. Nevertheless, we believe that a decisive defeat of the guerrillas during the next two years is unlikely, that the attrition of rebel manpower will continue to be a relatively gradual and costly process for the government, and that rebel commanders will continue to shift to a terrorist strategy designed to offset the widening numerical and materiel advantages of the Salvadoran armed forces. As a result, we believe the government will remain particularly vulnerable to dramatic acts of urban terrorism and continuing economic sabotage that have the potential to undermine—or at the very least slow—Salvadoran democratization efforts.

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Guerrilla military fortunes, in our view, have declined appreciably in the last two years and are now at or near their lowest ebb since the onset of hostilities in 1980. In addition to the rebels' loss of the tactical initiative, government successes have magnified divisions between the political and military factions of the rebel alliance, sapped insurgent morale, and contributed to increased desertions. Moreover, we believe the insurgents are receiving significantly less materiel assistance from Havana and Managua. This reduction appears to stem in part from reduced need due to the declining guerrilla combat strength—down some 3,000 from a late 1983 peak of 10,000 to a current level of some 7,000—and from the shift to small-unit, less resource-intensive tactics. Concurrently, US pressures and Cuban and Nicaraguan reevaluations of near-term prospects for rebel victory have contributed to a scaling back of support to levels designed to maintain rather than expand the insurgency.

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In our judgment, the insurgents' waning military prospects also are attributable in part to the improved performance of the Salvadoran armed forces, now numbering some 51,000 men. In particular, the military—largely as a result of US assistance and training support—has been able to be more aggressive in the countryside and make better use of expanding airpower and ground probes.

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Although we believe the insurgents are no longer capable of launching and sustaining major offensives, they remain a dangerous force able to inflict

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significant political, economic, and military damage. Despite the government's substantially improved performance, rebel casualties are actually down this year compared to last year, and the insurgents' strategy of small-scale operations in the countryside and terrorism and sabotage in the cities should enable them to conserve manpower and husband other resources. In addition, we expect that they will continue to foster student and labor unrest.

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In our judgment, the insurgents recognize that their strategy and tactics are unlikely to bring them victory. From their perspective, however, terrorism and sabotage have the potential of highlighting the vulnerability of the government, driving a wedge between civilian and military organizations, deflecting government attention from other issues such as the economy, and possibly helping provoke a rightwing backlash.

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We believe the experience of the last two years demonstrates that the government's ability to counter these threats is a long-term process and that progress during the next two years will remain gradual. We believe that the military will continue to do best in the countryside, where its manpower advantage—currently 7 to 1—will better enable the high command to keep pressure on the guerrillas. Progress in building up civil defense forces and implementing the "National Plan" of military-civic action programs, however, is likely to be slow, given economic constraints and the questionable commitment of some Salvadoran field commanders.

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In the cities, we believe the government can expect to make only modest headway in combating urban terrorism. Although the government has announced numerous plans and created new organizations to better coordinate its antiterrorist efforts, we see little prospect of rapid improvement in their effectiveness. Government efforts will continue to be hindered by shortages of equipment and training, and lack of coordination between sometimes competing agencies and organizations charged with providing security.

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Although we do not believe either the government or leftist insurgents are well positioned to win a final victory during the next two years, we admit the possibility of two alternative outcomes. In the first, the capability and performance of the Salvadoran military could improve more rapidly than

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currently expected, allowing the armed forces to take the war more aggressively to the rebels, and reducing the insurgency to somewhere near the “nuisance” status that characterized it in the late 1970s. Another possible outcome would be that increased rebel terrorism and economic sabotage over time could undermine the credibility and viability of the Duarte government, particularly if cooperation between the President and the military decreased, and external aid—including the delivery of SA-7 missiles—increased. In our judgment, the successful use of SA-7s by the rebels could have a particularly adverse psychological effect on the military as well as make the Air Force more reluctant to risk its air assets. []

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Looking beyond the domestic aspects of the war, relations between the United States and El Salvador will continue to be colored in large measure by Salvadoran dependence on Washington for economic and military assistance. Above all, San Salvador wants Washington to increase its economic and military commitment while continuing to express public support. At the same time, we believe the rebels have concluded that continuing terrorism and economic sabotage will weaken US resolve and provoke renewed public debate in the United States over the wisdom of supporting the Duarte government. As the rebels try to raise the cost of supporting the civilian regime, we expect that US personnel—perhaps including dependents—increasingly may become targets of terrorist acts.

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Figure 1



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El Salvador: A Net Assessment of the War

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Introduction

In our judgment, the military stalemate in El Salvador's six-year-old conflict was broken in 1984, as a better led, more mobile, and increasingly aggressive Army gained the military advantage against the guerrillas in the countryside. Rebel leaders have been forced almost entirely to abandon emphasis on large-unit attacks in favor of small-unit and urban terrorist actions. The insurgents now face a significantly stronger military foe that outnumbers them 7 to 1 and whose leaders increasingly are confident of eventual victory. Nevertheless, the battle for El Salvador historically has been cyclical, and the insurgents have proved to be a resilient force capable of exploiting the Salvadoran military's continuing weaknesses, as witnessed by the rebel commando raid on the Army's training center at La Union in October 1985 that resulted in more than 100 soldiers killed or wounded.

This paper discusses the current state of combat in El Salvador. It evaluates the changing strengths and weaknesses of the Salvadoran military and the insurgents, and identifies the key factors that have enabled the Army to gain the tactical momentum. The paper also examines the rebels' likely goals and strategies over the next two years, paying particular attention to the significance of their recent tactical shifts. The paper concludes by assessing the implications for the United States of what we believe is the changed balance of forces in El Salvador.

The Salvadoran Military

In our judgment, the changed military balance between government troops and the insurgents reflects the improved capabilities and responsiveness of the Salvadoran military. In the last two years, the armed forces—with strong US financial, material, and logistic support—have been able to seize and hold the battlefield initiative. The increasingly effective use of

manpower and equipment advantages as well as the development of a "winning" attitude within the officer corps has resulted in a more aggressive counterinsurgency program that has kept the guerrillas on the strategic defensive. Nevertheless, persistent organizational and performance shortcomings remain and will continue to hamper efforts to achieve a definitive military victory.

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Areas of Improvement

Manpower and Training. In our judgment, the Salvadoran armed forces have made significant strides in both increasing their size and improving the quality and scope of training. Overall troop strength has expanded by more than 60 percent in the last two years with the armed forces growing from 32,000 in late 1983 to approximately 51,000 at present, according to

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are remaining on active duty, particularly those in key frontline commands.

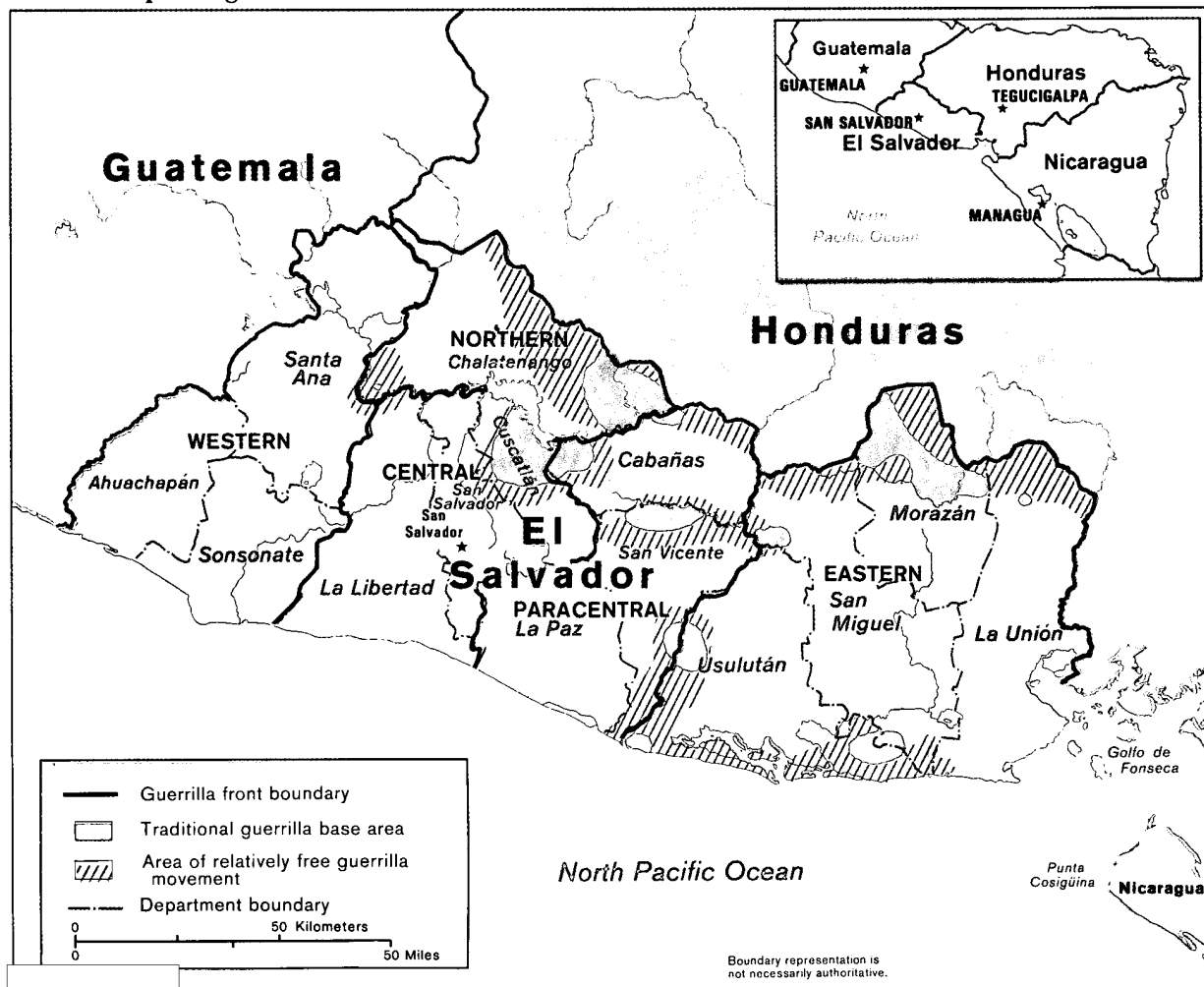
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increasingly is filtering down to the rank and file. The Salvadoran training center at La Union—employing a more organized syllabus than in the past—now trains tactical units of seasoned veterans as well as individual recruits.

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Figure 2
Guerrilla Operating Areas



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Table 1
Salvadoran Armed Forces' Expansion

	Mid-1979	Mid-1981	Mid-1983	January 1984	July 1985
Total armed forces' establishment	12,710	17,310	32,040	39,800	51,100
Military services					
Army	7,130	9,170	22,460	27,300	36,100
Navy	80	350	380	500	1,200
Air Force	150	180	440	500	1,000
Total	7,360	9,700	23,280	28,300	38,300
Public security forces					
National Guard	2,750	3,460	3,390	4,200	4,800
National Police	1,500	2,830	3,580	5,500	6,000
Treasury Police	1,100	1,320	1,790	1,800	2,000
Total	5,350	7,610	8,760	11,500	12,800

soldiers involved in formal NCO leadership classes and weapons specialization courses. [redacted]

Military Reorganization. The dramatic expansion in force strength, according to [redacted] US Embassy sources, has reinforced morale and institutional cohesiveness already noticeably improved as a result of earlier reorganizations. Since late 1983, the Salvadoran military has completely restructured its headquarters staff and tightened command and control of its combat units. Changes in personnel and in administrative and operational policies have generated positive responses within the officer corps, largely because they have focused the energy and resources of the armed forces on military as opposed to political matters. In our judgment, the increasing willingness of military officers to "leave politics to the civilians" has reduced potentially harmful distractions and tensions in the armed forces, forged greater military unity of purpose, encouraged tactical innovation, and improved morale among officers and enlisted ranks alike. [redacted]

Restructuring, in many cases, also has permitted the military to better use its trained units, [redacted] For example, each of the six

military brigades has restructured its standard infantry battalions into counterinsurgency forces with their own support and weapons elements. These units are broken down into company-size reconnaissance forces able to operate independently in the field for longer periods of time. US Embassy [redacted] that special long-range patrol and reconnaissance units, complemented by Navy commandos, are capable of infiltrating guerrilla-held zones to [redacted] and analysis also have grown in number and have become tactically more proficient, [redacted]

In addition, the US training of combat paramedics and the use of medevac helicopters since 1984 have significantly reduced the number of soldiers killed in action, [redacted] More units now have permanently assigned medical personnel both in garrison and in the field. US Embassy and defense attache reporting also indicates that these medical personnel have become part of the larger government effort to win popular support in the

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Figure 3
Military Brigades and Zone Boundaries



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countryside by regularly treating guerrilla and civilian casualties. [redacted]

The armed forces also are expanding a psychological operations program designed to win greater popular support. During the past year, [redacted]

[redacted] that improved resources and organization have enhanced the effectiveness of operations directed at the rebels. For example, propaganda leaflets and public address systems mounted on aircraft

have carried the government's message to the insurgent rank and file in regions heretofore inaccessible to the government. According to [redacted]

[redacted] US Embassy reporting, hundreds of guerrilla combatants and their supporters deserted in 1985, often in direct response to the psychological operations campaign. [redacted]

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Tactical Shifts.

manpower and training improvements and organizational shifts have been matched by tactical progress in the field. Although improvements have evolved slowly and remain subject to frequent setbacks, we believe—based on a large body of [redacted] and the US Embassy—that tactical changes have been central to the government’s ability to break the strategic stalemate that existed from 1981 through 1983. [redacted] that, during the 1981-83 period, the armed forces, strapped by meager human and material resources, adopted a garrison mentality that focused on defending urban bases and on engaging the enemy only during daylight hours. This permitted the rebels—who in our judgment were then as well trained, led, motivated, and often as well equipped as their opponent—to move freely throughout large portions of the countryside and to operate relatively unhindered at night. [redacted]

[redacted] however, that by the end of 1983 the armed forces—partly as a result of the restructuring of the chain of command—were employing their limited resources in a more sophisticated counterinsurgency strategy. Better trained and motivated junior officers began to receive leadership opportunities ahead of more senior officers at the battalion and company levels, while selected senior enlisted men were given greater responsibilities at the platoon and squad levels. The impact of these changes was magnified by the increasing provision of better equipment—including standardized automatic weapons, webgear, adequate ammunition, and provisions. At the same time, [redacted] that heavy-support weapons including machineguns, mortars, recoilless rifles, and artillery became more available to line commands. [redacted]

Expanded Airpower. In our judgment, the gradual strengthening of the Salvadoran Air Force has been a critical factor in enabling the government to pursue new and more effective strategies. [redacted] the Air Force in the last two years has doubled its number of transport helicopters and quadrupled its inventory of support gunships and attack aircraft—helicopters, prop planes, and jets.

Table 2
Major Air Force Assets

	Mid-1983	Current
Total	36	82
UH-1H helicopters	27	47
UH-1M helicopters	0	12
A-37 attack aircraft	6	9
Hughes 500 helicopters	3	7
C-47 airborne fire-support platforms	0	7

Since mid-1983, according to US Embassy and [redacted]

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"Pink Team" Operations

[redacted] that the military has become increasingly skilled at operations coordinating air support, intelligence, and ground troop deployment. So-called Pink Team operations involve an observation helicopter scouting and marking the location of a target—either a guerrilla base camp or insurgent personnel on the move—followed by air attacks by other helicopters or fixed-wing gunships and the insertion by helicopter of a reaction team of 20 to 60 men from the Airborne Battalion.

[redacted] a high-ranking guerrilla leader in April 1985, and resulted in an estimated 40 insurgents being killed in a July 1985 operation. [redacted]

Pink Teams also have taken a severe toll—in terms of casualties, confiscated documents, and captured leaders—on the Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers (PRTC), the group responsible for the 19 June slaying of the US Marines.

[redacted] reporting,

the government's use of airpower also has become more sophisticated and effective. Ground troops are displaying greater precision when calling for air support missions, and pilots are given strict instructions

against risking civilian casualties. Insurgent claims notwithstanding, [redacted] the Air Force has consistently limited itself to attacking legitimate military targets. In the one confirmed instance in 1985 when the Air Force mistakenly bombed a small hamlet killing several civilians, the government quickly apologized and compensated monetarily the families of the victims, [redacted]

Continuing Weaknesses

While numerous improvements have occurred, a number of deficiencies still hamper the military's performance. [redacted]

[redacted] we believe the military's ability to overcome them is limited and that improvements during the next two years will be incremental at best. [redacted]

In our judgment, the tradition of rewarding loyalty and longevity with promotion to senior command positions continues to weaken leadership and undermine accountability. Although it appears these practices are less pronounced than in the past—judging from recent promotion lists—they nevertheless still exert considerable influence, in our judgment. This is particularly true at the most senior levels, in our opinion, where military academy graduating class allegiances, as well as business and family ties, often take precedence over merit. For example, a senior Army colonel—a classmate of members of the high command—was given a top general staff position in early 1984, despite the fact that only weeks before his incompetence allowed guerrillas to overrun his brigade headquarters, according to [redacted]

[redacted] defense attache sources, [redacted]

In addition, [redacted] corruption and abuses of authority among officers also continue to be tolerated, although less so than in the past. Judging from local press accounts and US Embassy reporting, the public perception lingers that the military remains above civilian authority. [redacted]

The military also continues to be plagued by periodic tactical breakdowns. [redacted]

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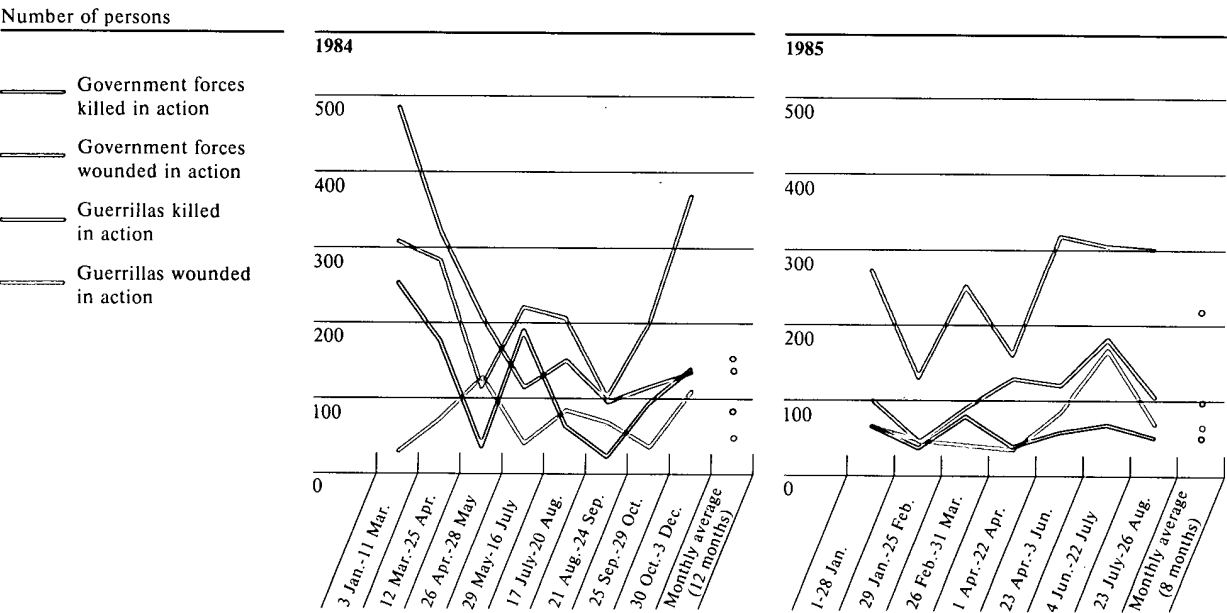
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Figure 4
El Salvador: War Casualties



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two of the more common deficiencies the failure of some field commanders to follow operational plans as well as the improper deployment of troops.

due to an alleged lack of aggressiveness by the Army. In other regions,

that favor large-scale sweeps close to headquarters instead of sustained small-unit operations farther afield.

We believe the uneven and unbalanced development of the Navy and the three security forces—the National Police, Treasury Police, and National Guard—also works against the military’s ability to wage a coordinated and comprehensive anti-insurgent strategy.

that success in building up naval combat units has not been matched by needed increases in seacraft and trained sailors. As a consequence, the coast remains largely unsupervised by maritime patrols, and equipment and facilities necessary to support even the currently modest level of naval operations are decidedly inadequate, according to

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In our judgment, the security forces will require major additional funding and training if they are to become full partners with the regular military services in combating the rebels. The security forces—principally assigned to larger provincial cities and the capital—are now ill equipped and poorly trained to meet their broad police responsibilities, which include fighting crime and serving as antiterrorist reaction forces, rural constabularies, and paramilitary combat troops. The US Embassy believes that more and better weapons, logistics, communications, intelligence, and manpower are especially important for the security forces in the capital if they are to be effective against the urban terrorist threat. []

In our view, liaison with the neighboring Guatemalan and Honduran militaries is another weak spot. Throughout the six-year conflict, US Embassy reporting has shown that the Salvadoran military has established only token cooperation with its counterparts in those two countries to help control rebel logistics, communications, and combat operations. The longstanding border dispute between El Salvador and Honduras and continuing mutual suspicion since the 1969 war have made cooperation between Tegucigalpa and San Salvador particularly difficult. Over the past year, relations were characterized by frequent misunderstandings and recriminations as well as several minor clashes. [] in both countries indicates that the level of military cooperation is likely to remain low until the parties can resolve their border disagreements. []

The Insurgency

Dwindling Resources

A survey of key indicators suggests that the Salvadoran guerrillas have been on the defensive for the last two years, and, in our judgment, they are now more than ever further from achieving military victory. Recurring Army sweeps have uprooted insurgents from base areas and disrupted their supply systems. Shortages of essentials such as food and weapons—made worse by decreased external support—have

sapped guerrilla morale and led to increased desertions, [] Politically, the increasing turn to terrorism has sharpened longstanding disputes within the guerrilla alliance. []

Based on the tactical record, the guerrillas' increasing reliance on small-unit attacks continues. With the exception of the dramatic attack at the military training center in La Union in October 1985, the insurgents have not been able to claim a decisive major victory since they overran an Army garrison and destroyed an important bridge in late 1983. Large-scale insurgent operations—defined here as attacks by more than a hundred men—have fallen off considerably, [] from an average of several per month in 1983 to only about one per month in 1985. In addition, these attacks have been largely against civil defense units and poorly trained and equipped security forces rather than against Army units. []

Based on figures compiled from General Staff reports, during the first eight months of 1985, the guerrillas killed on average some 45 percent fewer Salvadoran soldiers than during the same period in 1984. We note, however, that the average number of government troops wounded per month increased by more than 50 percent, suggesting, in our judgment, that reduced fatalities may in part be due to the government's improved medevac performance as well as to greater insurgent use of mines that often maim rather than kill. Overall, the guerrillas have inflicted comparable numbers of total casualties on government forces for the last several years, although 1985 monthly averages have been nearly 15 percent higher than those of 1984, that is, 260 compared with 230 in 1984. The reduction of government troops killed in action, however, and the military's greater manpower levels have made the casualty rate far less of a burden on government forces. []

Manpower Reductions. Recruitment difficulties, casualties, and desertions have cost the rebels

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Table 3
Components of the Farabundo Marti
National Liberation Front (FMLN)

Faction ^a	Primary Offensive Force	Remarks
People's Revolutionary Army (ERP)	Rafael Arce Zablah Brigade (BRAZ)	Faction's leader, Joaquin Villalobas, considered best guerrilla military strategist. Most active militarily; generally operates independently of other groups.
Popular Liberation Forces (FPL)	Felipe Pena Mendoza Group	Traditional proponent of protracted war; small splinter groups operate in San Salvador area.
Armed Forces of Liberation (FAL)	Rafael Aguinada Carranza Battalion	Military arm of Communist Party; cooperating more with FPL in combat operations.
Armed Forces of National Resistance (FARN)	Sergio Hernandez and Carlos Arias Battalions	Least doctrinaire group; also cooperating more with FPL.
Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers (PRTC)	Luis Adalberto Diaz Detachment	Least influential faction; emphasis on urban operations. Responsible for 19 June killing of US Marines in San Salvador.

^a Total force strength as of December 1985 = 7,000.

[redacted]

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significant losses of men in the last two years. We believe the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) reached its highest effective strength of some 10,000 armed combatants in late 1983, of which about 7,000 were well-armed, well-trained, and combat-experienced rebels. Since then, we believe the insurgents have incurred a net loss of some 3,000 men.

[redacted]

[redacted] reporting suggests that, while guerrilla combat deaths may be declining as the rebels have been avoiding direct confrontations with government troops, desertions have generally increased. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] disillusionment with the guerrilla cause, low morale caused by more difficult living conditions, and diminished prospects for victory are prime incentives to desert. [redacted]

[redacted]

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Losses stemming from combat casualties and desertions helped prompt the rebels to begin a massive forced recruitment campaign in 1984, [redacted]

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[redacted]

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Table 4
Armed Forces' Casualties ^a

	Mid-1981	Mid-1982	Mid-1983	Jan. 1984	Dec. 1985
Casualties (killed or wounded)	3,000	3,500	3,200	2,700	3,100 ^b
Military strength	17,314	28,350	32,039	39,800	51,100

^a The figures we have used are Salvadoran military statistics.
^b This figure includes our estimate for the December 1985 casualty rate.

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] In our judgment, the rebels face the prospect of increasingly confronting better trained government personnel with fewer battle-hardened insurgent veterans. [redacted]

Loss of Firepower. [redacted]

[redacted] it appears to us that the military's buildup and the guerrillas' growing inability to acquire military hardware from outside sources have widened the gap in firepower. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] the armed forces' surveillance and interdiction efforts have hampered regular guerrilla resupply routes and forced the insurgents to draw on caches of weapons and munitions stored throughout the country. [redacted]

In addition, Cuba and Nicaragua—the primary sources of external aid—appear to have cut back their supply of arms to the insurgents. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Reduced Funding. [redacted]

[redacted] the insurgents have had to contend with declining financial support from foreign sources. In our judgment, the fall stems from growing disenchantment and distrust of the guerrillas among many traditional foreign donors, the existence of competing “revolutionary” and humanitarian causes, and US diplomatic pressure. [redacted]

[redacted]

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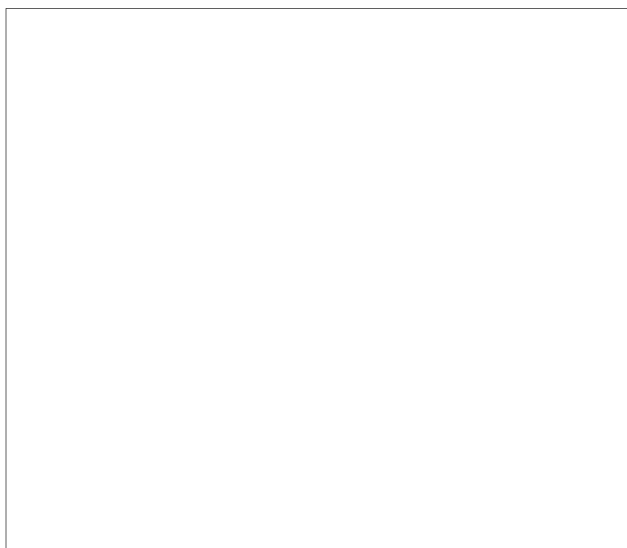
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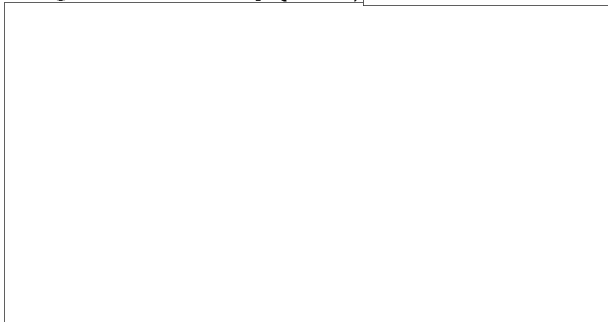
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Faced with a financial crisis, insurgent factions increasingly have been forced to turn to tactics they recognize alienate the populace, [redacted]



Declining Popular Support. [redacted]



[redacted] We earlier estimated—[redacted]

[redacted] that in early 1980 the guerrillas probably enjoyed the support of perhaps 15 percent of the Salvadoran citizenry. [redacted]



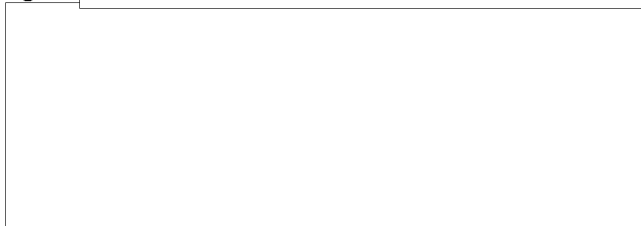
[redacted] we believe that general popular support for the rebels has fallen to less than 5 percent during the last two years. [redacted]



Internationally, US Embassy and press reporting indicates that some governments and groups in Western Europe and Latin America that earlier were sympathetic to the Salvadoran left have begun slowly to extend diplomatic and financial support to the Duarte administration. [redacted]

Unless the insurgents change their strategy or the government seriously missteps, we believe rebel appeal is likely to continue to decline, particularly if the guerrillas continue to attack civilian targets. Although, in our judgment, the guerrillas will continue to enjoy the following of a hardcore of dedicated supporters—unlikely to be dissuaded by anything short of total government victory—the insurgents will find it difficult to sell their cause to less committed and more apolitical Salvadorans. [redacted]

Internal Factionalism. Within the movement, the rebels' declining military fortunes have sharpened leadership rivalries and debates over tactics and strategies. [redacted]



[redacted] US Embassy sources indicate that some progress is being made in consolidating the top echelon of the insurgency into a more unified command, and that these efforts are reflected in an increase in joint small-unit operations and training exercises. [redacted]

Nevertheless, the weight of evidence, in our judgment, indicates that the rebels will not be able, at least in the near term, to overcome internal problems and create a unified military force throughout the ranks. We believe rebel infighting—including the refusal of

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some units to share funds, equipment, intelligence, and support personnel—will continue to hamper the guerrillas' war effort.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Disputes between the political and military wings of the insurgency—often aired in public communiques—also underscore the lack of a unified rebel command structure. Although these divisions, in our judgment, are not likely to lead in the near term to an irreparable rupture, they seriously undermine the credibility of the rebel leadership.

[Redacted]

Residual Rebel Strengths

Despite its numerous weaknesses, we believe the rebel alliance is capable of marshaling enough resources to maintain a credible war effort for at least the next two

years. In particular, the insurgents' organizational, intelligence, and communications strengths should help them weather an extended period on the political and military defensive.

[Redacted]

Organization.

[Redacted]

By dispersing into ever smaller units, the guerrillas have been able to reduce fatalities and husband their resources in the face of increasingly aggressive Army offensives, according to US Embassy and [Redacted]

When opportunities arise, the rebels still are able to mass some units for specific operations outside of their areas of concentration. Since the beginning of 1985, for example, insurgents have raided several small towns in relatively secure areas, seriously damaged urban telecommunications facilities, and even attacked the national penitentiary on the outskirts of the capital, freeing over 150 prisoners. In October 1985—in the midst of the Duarte kidnaping—the insurgents launched a nighttime raid on the military training center in La Union, killing some 43 soldiers and wounding about 75.

[Redacted]

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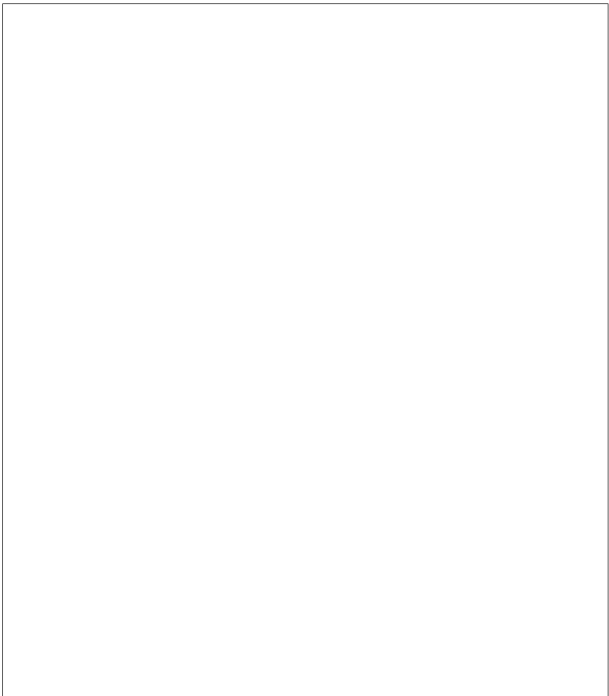
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Australia. At least three representatives are responsible for liaison with Eastern Bloc countries and Libya. Such elements also oversee propaganda activities and financial collections of solidarity groups. [redacted] 25X1

We believe student organizations in El Salvador—particularly leftist groups at the National University—remain an important source of support for the insurgent alliance. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

[redacted] The US Embassy reports that Marxist-led student groups have participated in a number of street demonstrations in 1985 protesting US “intervention” and the government’s policies. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

Propaganda and Front Groups. A review of press reports shows that diverse Salvadoran pressure groups, such as the self-appointed Human Rights Commission, several religious “watchdog” agencies, and a growing number of “mothers’ committees”—which US Embassy sources indicate are propaganda fronts for the insurgents—continue visible and vocal political agitation both at home and abroad. Although we believe the overall number of rebel sympathizers or supporters has decreased dramatically, [redacted] the guerrillas continue to value the activities of these groups because of the publicity they are able to generate. [redacted]

The insurgents continue to seek international support and recognition. The political arm of the insurgency—the Revolutionary Democratic Front, for example—has established interest sections and information offices throughout the world, and is linked with some 70 “solidarity” organizations in North and South America, Europe, and Africa, according to [redacted] the media, and US Embassy reporting. [redacted] rebel “representatives” service over 30 Western countries, including the United States, Canada, France, most NATO members, Switzerland, Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, and

In our judgment, the Marxist labor sector complements student activism in support of the insurgency. According to Embassy reporting, extreme leftist unions have engaged in repeated work stoppages and demonstrations against government ministries, autonomous agencies, and private firms since President Duarte took office in June 1984. [redacted] 25X1

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Labor groups reportedly have been encouraged by signs of what they see as the Duarte government’s occasional overreaction to strikes and demonstrations by public-sector employees who are members of the 25X1

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Marxist unions. For example, US Embassy informants have cited as evidence the government's botched attempt in May 1985 to storm a hospital occupied by militant Social Security employees that ended in the killing of four policemen and provoked considerable public dismay. [REDACTED]

The left, [REDACTED] hopes its labor strength will help to win popular sympathy for more widespread work stoppages that, in turn, will put greater pressure on the Duarte administration. In our judgment, the rebels already can claim some progress, as underscored by the turnout of 10,000 leftist union members and their sympathizers during the 1 May 1985 Labor Day march in the capital. US Embassy observers have noted that the 1985 march was in stark contrast to the gathering of only a few hundred in 1984. [REDACTED] the insurgents hope to parlay new government austerity measures—announced in January 1986—into union support for a general strike. [REDACTED]

Status of the War: A New Phase

Rebel leaders publicly claim to be initiating a “new phase” of the conflict—a war of attrition that will exact maximum costs on the government with minimum expenditures of their own resources. Insurgent strategy now calls for increased economic sabotage, saturation of the countryside with antipersonnel mines and boobytraps, hit-and-run assaults on poorly defended military and civilian targets, and urban terrorism. While such a strategy is unlikely to allow the rebels to defeat the now militarily stronger Salvadoran armed forces, it could—by escalating terrorism, economic destruction, and political turmoil—slow or even reverse the democratization process. [REDACTED]

On the political front, [REDACTED] the rebels are focusing on an escalation of political agitation by radical church and human rights groups, militant student associations, and labor unions. [REDACTED] the guerrillas are planning a new umbrella organization, the

“National Forum,” and apparently hope to re-create the “Popular Forum” of the late 1970s—an opposition movement made up of virtually every left-of-center grouping in the country. US Embassy sources with access to the left believe that such an effort could undermine the emerging democratic process from within. [REDACTED]

In our judgment, the “new phase” is in fact a survival strategy. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Public statements made by guerrilla leaders hint that, although they expect to continue fighting indefinitely, they are casting an eye toward the 1988 US election period. By that time, [REDACTED] the guerrillas hope the prospect of a seemingly interminable war will have convinced US public opinion and the [REDACTED]

Changing Rebel Tactics

Among the most dramatic tactical shifts by the guerrillas in 1985 has been the widespread and indiscriminate use of antivehicle and antipersonnel mines and boobytraps. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] in early January 1985 that the rebel alliance had decided to saturate roads and rural areas with mines, using explosive charges calculated to achieve maximum psychological impact by maiming rather than killing. During the first six months of 1985, the Salvadoran military reported that nearly 30 percent of government battlefield casualties came from mines.

In recent months, [REDACTED] mines and boobytraps have continued to account for 14 percent of all military deaths and 47 percent of the wounded. [REDACTED]

Rebel use of mines is not only more frequent but also more technically sophisticated. [REDACTED]

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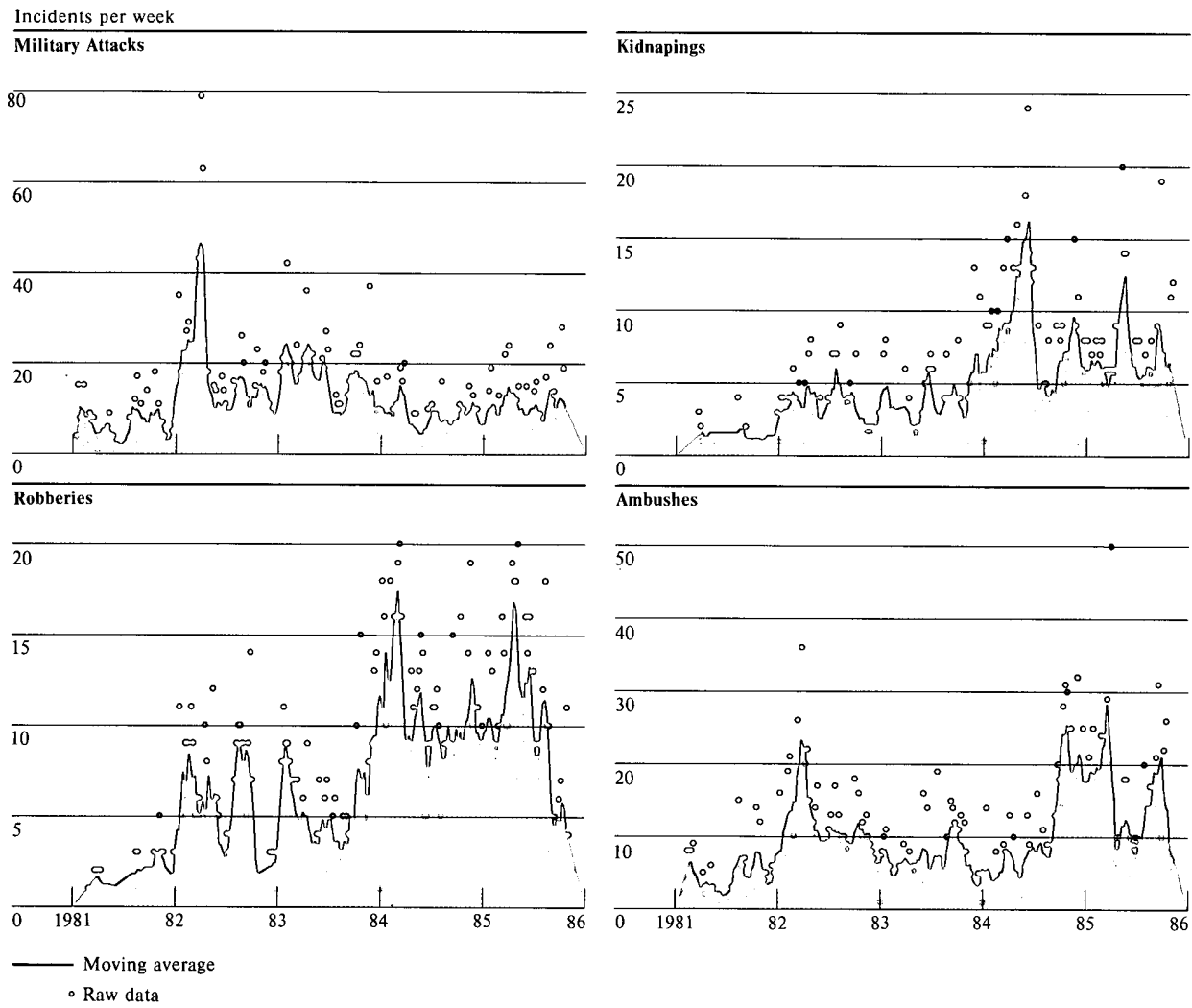
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Figure 5
El Salvador: Guerrilla-Initiated Actions



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The rebels also are escalating their sabotage of economic targets. Official statistics show that during the

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first six months of 1985 such operations increased more than 550 percent over the same period in 1984. Prominent targets have included the nation's electrical grid, telecommunications and other public services, commercial transport, and private agricultural facilities. In January 1986, the rebels destroyed nearly 40 electrical pylons causing lengthy blackouts in San Salvador and throughout much of eastern El Salvador. []

Terrorism also is now a favored tactic. According to public statements by rebel spokesmen [] the guerrillas are engaging in rural terrorism to convince the populace that the government does not exercise authority in the countryside. In the first half of 1985, insurgent raiders destroyed 75 provincial town halls and other nonmilitary public facilities, compared to about 12 during all of 1984, according to US Embassy reporting. []

Moreover, the rebels abducted more than two dozen mayors from towns in the east following the March 1985 legislative and municipal elections, murdering two of them. In a particularly brutal episode in April 1985, guerrilla death squads massacred 29 men and women in Santa Cruz Loma in La Paz Department on the suspicion that they were civil defense personnel and government supporters. Rebel leaders generally have defended these tactics publicly by claiming that "US intervention" in El Salvador leaves them no choice. []

The majority of reporting also indicates a broad leftist commitment to urban terrorism and a willingness to defend its use despite opposition from some non-Marxist elements of the insurgent alliance, the mainstream Catholic Church, and Salvadoran public opinion at large. []

[] US diplomats and military personnel also are primary targets; the rebels evidently believe that terrorism against US personnel will force Washington to reduce its presence in El Salvador and perhaps eventually cut back its financial and material support. []

Government Response

We believe that, although the Salvadoran Government will be able to maintain its current military momentum in the countryside, it faces a considerably more difficult job in curbing urban terrorism. The government has had some recent successes in capturing key urban guerrilla leaders, but, in our view, it will remain vulnerable during the next year or two to terrorist actions similar to the June 1985 Zona Rosa massacre or the kidnaping of President Duarte's daughter. []

In the Countryside: Civic Action and Civil Defense.

In our judgment, the Salvadoran military is capable of continuing and perhaps building on the strategies that have given it the advantage in the countryside. [] the military high command, for example, now recognizes that regular patrol bases for elite units operating in guerrilla areas can counter the standard rebel ploy of fleeing Army sweeps but returning quickly when government forces depart. In addition, we believe the Salvadoran military is capable of improving on current efforts to:

- Develop additional "Pink Teams" to increase the military's airmobile capabilities. These units are designed to coordinate helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft with land assaults against insurgent bases. Three additional teams are being drawn up and could be based at the nearly completed []

[] reporting. By so doing, the government would improve considerably its reaction time in the militarily active eastern part of the country.

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- Continue frequent sweeps into rebel strongholds and logistic centers in an effort to erode guerrilla morale further, and disrupt rebel supply lines.
- Continue to focus on interdicting guerrilla resupply lines. [redacted]

We believe that, although the Salvadoran military is capable of maintaining the upper hand during the time frame of this assessment, longer-term progress requires more comprehensive counterinsurgency programs. Such efforts to date are constrained by a lack of resources and technical expertise, as well as a less-than-total commitment on the part of some civilian and military authorities. [redacted]

According to US Embassy reports, civic action efforts heretofore have revolved around a "National Plan" that calls for eliminating the insurgents from a particular area followed by a combined military-civilian effort to strengthen local government and restore essential public services. A National Commission, consisting of representatives from seven participating national ministries, is charged with charting government policy while similar committees exist at the department and municipal levels. Implementation of the plan began first in mid-1983 in San Vicente Department and was extended to neighboring Usulután in 1984. Both departments are key agricultural areas for the government as well as important logistic hubs for the insurgents. [redacted]

Although by late 1985 the program technically had been extended to seven more departments, [redacted] indicates slow progress. Overall, we concur with the US Embassy that the armed forces have yet to provide sufficient security to designated areas and that efforts by local field commanders continue to be largely ad hoc. Some commanders,

reporting, are threatening communities with a cutoff of development aid unless they establish civil defense units. Perhaps more important, President Duarte has

yet to strongly support the program or involve the private sector in it. One indicator of the government's lack of support is the declining budget allocation that civic action programs have received. Over the period 1980-85, the government budget as a percentage of the GNP has remained constant, but funds for public works and services have declined by about one-third. [redacted]

In the related area of civil defense, the military's training program, started in early 1984, so far has produced about 140 instructors who in turn have trained some 7,000 civil defense members, according to US Embassy and attache reporting. Overall, however, [redacted] the government fell far short of achieving its goal of establishing a total of 165 units in all 14 departments by the end of 1985, and in fact has only some 53 units in 262 municipalities. The program is designed to develop a core of local residents willing and able to defend their homes from insurgent attacks after an area has been initially secured by the armed forces. [redacted]

[redacted] In some cases, according to [redacted], localities are reluctant to establish units unless the armed forces commit themselves to come to their aid. The military, however, is hesitant to make such a commitment in the absence of an active and credible civil defense unit, and, even when such units exist, the military often is slow to respond. The US Embassy reported that in one incident in July 1985 a civil defense unit in Chalatenango was mauled because the nearest military garrison—less than 3 kilometers away—waited several hours after the insurgents had withdrawn to send help. [redacted]

The US defense attache reports that few of the local volunteers are armed, and then only with carbines; radios linking units with regular military forces also are inadequate [redacted]

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[redacted]

These problems aside, the civil defense units have scored some successes against the insurgents. [redacted]

[redacted]

successfully defended the area against two rebel attacks in 1985. In October 1985, a smaller unit engaged an insurgent group twice its size and inflicted several casualties. In our judgment, public anger and opposition to rebel tactics of mining and robbery—borne out in recent Embassy reporting—has the potential to make civil defense units a more appealing alternative to the lack of rural security. [redacted]

In the Cities. We concur with the US Embassy assessment that the Duarte administration's ability to counter rebel urban terrorism is inadequate and that the government will continue to be plagued by shortages of weapons, radios, and vehicles, as well as a lack of training in counterterrorist operations. [redacted]

[redacted] acknowledged that government efforts were being hampered seriously by an "acute" shortage of vehicles and communications. [redacted]

On the plus side, reporting indicates that public security forces are making an effort to work together more closely. The new US-supported Special Investigative Unit (SIU) has been empowered by President Duarte to investigate acts of terrorism, while a special US-trained, 48-man antiterrorist unit has been formed to react to the guerrilla threat in the capital. In the wake of the kidnaping of his daughter, Duarte publicly announced plans to create a National Security Council to coordinate military and civilian counterinsurgency efforts and to prevent the insurgents from driving a wedge between various civilian and military elements. [redacted]

We expect the government to register successes against the urban terrorist network but, at the same time, to remain vulnerable to spectacular and dramatic acts. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

We believe, however, that the insurgents remain capable of carrying out urban terrorist attacks that will draw public attention to their cause and highlight the government's continuing security weaknesses. [redacted]

[redacted]

Outlook: Continuing Conflict

We believe that Salvadoran Government forces probably will continue to make inroads against the insurgents over the next two years, but they are not well positioned to win a decisive military victory. The government has strengthened its ability to withstand the insurgent war of attrition, however, and we believe it will maintain the military initiative. Progress in implementing broader local programs that we believe are necessary to root out the durable, rebel hardcore is likely to be more gradual and uneven. [redacted]

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Balanced against this, we believe the military fortunes of the insurgents will continue to decline, albeit not at a dramatic rate. Popular support for the rebels is likely to continue to dwindle, in part because of their worsening human rights record. Moreover, attempts to justify murder, kidnaping, robbery, and economic sabotage—as well as their outright rejection of the democratization process—are likely to continue costing them economic and diplomatic support overseas. []

Overall, however, we do not believe the balance has tipped sufficiently to allow for a definitive resolution of the war. In particular, we believe government performance will continue to be characterized by erratic progress subject to some reversal. The government's "National Plan" is likely to be particularly vulnerable to guerrilla sabotage and harassment. Likewise, in our judgment, further advances in the two-year-old civil defense program—which we believe is critical to establishing more permanent government control in the countryside—will be difficult to achieve given the lack of material resources and the lackluster commitment of some local Army commanders. []

More challenging and threatening in the short run, however, is the insurgents' turn to urban terrorism. We believe that, although this shift does not threaten to bring down Duarte, prolonged urban terrorism and sabotage has the potential to sap popular support for the government, sow dissension between the military and the civilian authorities, and undermine longer-term economic and administrative reform. In particular, we believe the manipulation of labor groups has the potential to cripple the economy. Moreover, dramatic acts will continue to keep the guerrilla cause in the public eye and contribute to the impression that the insurgents are gaining strength. []

Implications for the United States

In our judgment, the rebels' recent shift in strategy and tactics is designed in part to raise the cost of Washington's support for El Salvador. At one level, we believe the insurgents will continue to search for

US targets of opportunity that, from their perspective, will draw attention to US involvement in San Salvador. The insurgents, for example, publicly noted that they viewed the October 1985 attack on the military training center as a partial failure because no US military personnel were killed. We also believe that US personnel—including dependents—will remain potential kidnap victims. Recent US Embassy [] reporting indicates that the insurgents have had some success in penetrating US installations and surveilling US personnel and dependents. []

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At another level, we believe the insurgents also calculate that Washington's support for San Salvador will wane in the face of an extended war of attrition. Although the guerrillas almost certainly do not expect the current administration to weaken its support for Duarte, we believe they see some prospect of sharpening the debate in the United States over Washington's role in the Salvadoran conflict. This goal could be furthered by reviving pressure—both diplomatically and through the foreign media—for new negotiations over power sharing with the government. Although [] the hardline guerrilla leaders dominate decisionmaking in the rebel movement, they appear willing to buy time by allowing more moderate political representatives to engage in a dialogue with the Duarte government. []

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In our opinion, there is no prospect that the Duarte government will be able to wean itself during the next two years from its material and financial dependence on the United States. In addition to continuing economic and military support, the Duarte government will look for continuing public and diplomatic approbation of both the government's conduct of the war and its progress toward democracy. []

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Alternative Scenarios

Although we believe it unlikely, we cannot discount the possibility that the military situation in El Salvador could turn rapidly in favor of either the government or the insurgents during the next two years, as outlined in the following two alternative scenarios.

**Government Forces Move Toward
Decisive Defeat of Rebels**

Under this scenario, dramatic improvements in the performance of the Salvadoran armed forces coupled with a series of tactical blunders—thus far not exhibited—by the rebels could reduce the insurgency to little more than the nuisance value that characterized it during the late 1970s. In particular, we believe this outcome would require sizable increases in foreign assistance to the Salvadoran armed forces.

In our judgment, the evolution of this scenario would be marked by the government becoming increasingly aggressive in pursuing large-scale sweeps, small-unit reconnaissance and harassment operations, and coordinated air and artillery attacks. In addition, we believe the government would have to make equally strong advances in combating urban terrorism, particularly by improving their security performance. Should such improvements occur, among other signs, we would expect to see that:

- *The insurgents believed they no longer could depend on traditional area strongholds to provide security and sanctuary.*
- *The rebels were having greater difficulty with arms resupply and being forced to rely largely on existing reserve caches.*
- *Desertions were significantly increasing.*
- *The ranks of guerrilla terrorism networks were being severely depleted.*

**Government Performance Falters Badly
Allowing the Insurgents To Seize
the Military and Political Offensive**

Under this scenario, the government's ability to stay the course against the insurgent war of attrition would decrease precipitously, undermining the legitimacy and credibility of the Duarte government. In particular, we believe a wave of terrorism or improved battlefield performance by the insurgents—perhaps as a result of the introduction of more sophisticated weaponry such as the SA-7—could contribute to a public impression that the government was losing control. An increase in leftist-inspired strikes and sabotage could further erode the government's position and bring the economy to a standstill.

Under this scenario, we would expect to see signs that:

- *The military increasingly believed that the prosecution of the military situation required more decisive action than a civilian government was capable of providing.*
- *The public at large was losing confidence in Duarte's leadership and the electorate was becoming increasingly polarized.*
- *Political parties become increasingly paralyzed by infighting.*
- *Economic conditions suffered a quick and sharp deterioration.*
- *Guerrilla unification efforts were resulting in the establishment of an authentic insurgent army led by a monolithic command element and following a well-defined strategic battle plan.*
- *Increased external support for the rebels, perhaps including the introduction and successful use of SA-7 antiaircraft missiles.*

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